The Fourth Church Pulpit

NOT FAR FROM THE KINGDOM

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: Deuteronomy 6:1-5, Mark 12:28-34

. . . "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. . . . You shall love your neighbor as yourself."
Mark 12:30, 31 (NRSV)

Two thousand years ago a young Jew, known to his friends as a Rabbi, came from the city of Nazareth where he had been living with his mother and brothers and sisters into the region of Lower Galilee. His name was Jesus and while he is the most familiar figure in all of history, what we actually know of him comes from four relatively brief documents which set out, not so much to be complete biographies, but to tell some of the things he did and said, how people reacted to him, and how a lot of people decided to follow him around Galilee. Mostly they want to tell how what he said and did got him in trouble with the authorities in Jerusalem and how ultimately he was executed as a troublemaker, a disturber of the peace and common good. And they want to tell how, after his execution, his followers became convinced that he was not dead, but alive and still in their midst.

And they want their readers to consider the most amazing idea of all, namely that the story of this first century Jewish peasant is also the story of God, and therefore the truest and most important story in all of human history, including that segment of human history occupied by your life and mine.

A contemporary student of the story, Professor John Dominic Crossan at DePaul University, says that it is radically subversive. In his book, *Jesus, A Revolutionary Biography,* Professor Crossan argues that Jesus came into a world organized around clear and rigid structures of inclusion and exclusion. Everybody knew who was privileged and who was not, who was moral and who was immoral, who was in/out, clean/unclean. There were visible and universally accepted principles of race, religion, moral behavior, class and gender which told a person who he or she was and what he/she might expect out of life. And Jesus, says Professor Crossan, attacked it whole system at its roots. He came into Galilee talking about the Kingdom of God. He said it was present. You don't have to die to get in. It's here — in the world. . . in your midst. And, remarkably, it is for everybody. It was not a place, the way he described it, but a state of being. It was God reigning. God's will done.

The Kingdom is what the world would be like if God were immediately in charge. [Crossan]

When people started to pay attention to him, he told them stories about a love like nothing they had ever experienced before.

His stories suggested that God's love extends to outsiders and insiders alike and implied that God was simply not interested in the ways people ordinarily divide and segment the human race. God, according to Jesus, doesn't care who comes to the dinner table, who touches whom; God apparently wants everybody to know about God and about God's amazing, startling graciousness. And this Jesus, according to the documents, went around Galilee behaving as if it were all true, as if he were accountable to God alone, as if everybody is included in the broad reach of God's holy love.

He actually sat down at table with people who were society's outsiders, and was seen in public talking to a woman of questionable morality, and touched, actually touched a leper — an untouchable; and welcomed and held and blessed the real nobodies — the children. In the process he undercut time-honored ways of thinking about religion and about God and about what it means to be human and faithful.

The story moves gradually and steadily from the pleasant hills of Galilee up the long rocky road to Jerusalem as the tension and sense of conflict increases. The Jerusalem authorities have noticed him; are concerned about the way he is attacking the very basic organizing principle of their society, which of course, supports their privilege and power. How, after all, can you be an insider if there are no outsiders? They are worried actually about the crowds and the potential for civil disorder which will mean tightened Roman control and oppression.

So they have sent truth squads to follow him, listen to what he is teaching, watch what he does and, at opportune moments, ask embarrassing trick questions. The hope is that in trying to answer he will discredit himself and maybe even say something illegal or blasphemous which will give them a reason to order his arrest.

They are a constant presence on the edge of every crowd, always badgering, probing. "What do you think about this, Jesus? Why did you say that? Why are your disciples associating with the wrong crowd? Why do you eat with unclean men and women?" Jesus spars with them a little, keeps his wits about him and his integrity intact. After he enters the city the process intensifies. Everywhere he goes they are there, the Scribes, the Pharisees. . . the lawyers.

One of them seems to be different. I'm sorry we don't know more about him. He may have come to embarrass and entrap but ends up asking his own question. And it's a good one. It's a great question. . . It's the question of value, moral authenticity. It's the question of how to live morally in this confusing world.

Which is the greatest commandment of all?

What's so significant about the question is that there were six or seven hundred laws and literally thousands of situational guidelines to prescribe correct behavior in every conceivable set of circumstances. How to reduce and refine it all to get at the heart — the precious center of meaning? It was a favorite Jewish teaching device. A disciple of the great first century Rabbi Hillel asked him to summarize the whole law while standing on one foot one time and he did it by saying:

> What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah, while the rest is commentary.

When I read that this time around I was reminded of a wonderfully helpful exercise the leaders of this church experienced not long ago: writing a mission statement. The catch was it could be no longer than seventy-five words. Now when church people talk about the mission or purpose of the church, they can go on a bit. 7,500 words might be a reasonable first draft. Seventy-five? No way. Well, we did it. And we learned a lesson a lot of other enterprises — commercial, educational — have had to learn, and that is what you really believe and will commit yourself to and live by can be said briefly.

And so there is a great answer to a great question. It comes in two parts.

The first everybody knows.

> Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.

The Shema: given to the people by Moses in the wilderness: repeated daily by faithful Jews for thousands of years.

The second part everybody knew well but ordinarily they didn't connect it to the first.

> You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Together, love of God, love of neighbor — these two are the greatest commandments.

The lawyer who asked the question originally now shows his colors. He may have come to embarrass Jesus, but this has become a moment of truth for him and he says an unlikely thing to the man he had come to embarrass:

> Teacher, you have spoken truly — to love God and neighbor — this is much more important than burnt offerings and sacrifices.

And Jesus said to him,

> You are not far from the Kingdom of God.

That's the revolutionary part. We've heard it so much we don't hear it really. Love of God and neighbor is more important than the rituals of religion. Love of God and neighbor is very close to what Jesus meant by the Kingdom. It's a whole new way of thinking about God and religion actually. Everybody knew that the appropriate human response to God is awe, fear, duty, obligation and guilt if you don't get it right. But Jesus suggested that the basic attitude to God is love. Religion is a love affair — think of that; a relationship of deep caring, a two-way relationship with passion and faithfulness and joy and laughter — on both sides.

But how in the world does a man or woman go about the love of God?

How to do it? The answer isn't complicated. It's your neighbor. By combining the two, Jesus suggests that the way to love God is by acting lovingly toward your neighbor. It is the inclusiveness of God's Kingdom pushed to the logical conclusion. No one is left out. All are included because God's people love neighbors and include all.

It is as radical and revolutionary today as it was 2,000 years ago.

It was tragically ironic, was it not, that at the very moment much of the Western world was mesmerized by a motion picture about the Holocaust, an Israeli Jew, born in Brooklyn, a physician, walked into a holy place, revered and used by Jews and Muslims, the place where Abraham and Sarah are buried — Hebron — and with an automatic rifle murdered thirty Muslims at prayer. It has been much on my mind, on all of our minds. A good friend is there, in Jerusalem. Micah Marty, our volunteer coordinator for two years, resigned a few months ago to pursue, among other interests, a vocation in photography. He is in the Near East to do photography for a book on Fundamentalisms, Christian — Jewish and Muslim.

The Hebron massacre occurred on February 25. Three days later we received a faxed letter dated February 28, Jerusalem, to:

> Dear Fourth Church Friends,
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> Well, this is all so very sad. Please pray for all of the people in this part of the world, on all sides.

Micah explained that travel is restricted, that the air is heavy with anxiety and fear, riots flare up and curfews are enforced which in turn prevent tens of thousands of innocent Palestinians from getting to their jobs. Hebron is only as far from where Micah is staying in Jerusalem as O'Hare is from downtown Chicago. And then his poignant observation:

> There is also, of course, an air of despair about what this will mean for any agreements between the Israelis and the Palestinians. The peace process seems increasingly like a fledgling garden where every time the tiniest flower of any color tries to blossom someone hurries over to stomp on it before it can flourish or multiply.

Why must tragedies like the Hebron massacre happen? Why do they happen? More to the point, how is it that a man who was devoted to healing and restoring life became convinced that the lives of a group of worshiping Moslems who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time were of no consequence, expendable in the interests of making a point politically?

How does that happen over and over again in human history? How did slavery happen? How did it happen in Germany in the 1940s as the Nazis systematically isolated, marginalized, rounded up, efficiently dehumanized, transported to concentration camps, gassed and cremated 6,000,000 Jews?

The motion picture, "Schindler's List" comes at a propitious moment. Steven Spielberg did not set out to answer the why, but simply to tell a remarkable story of a German businessman, Oskar Schindler, who went to Poland after the collapse of the Polish armed forces and the German occupation because he saw an excellent opportunity to do business. He made friends with Nazi party and military officials and arranged to buy and operate a manufacturing plant in Krakow, using Jews, herded into a sixteen square block ghetto, as the work force. And in the process of telling the story, Spielberg does show how it happens.

As the Jews are ejected from their homes and forced to move a few belongings into the ghetto, some people line the streets jeering at them. But not many. Most people simply watched it happening: didn't participate in it, didn't object, just watched. As the German troops move through the ghetto following the fateful decision to remove all Jews to concentration and labor camps, Schindler is sitting on a horse, enjoying a ride with his current mistress, looking down from a high bluff at the scene below, a distant and passive observer. In that scene, as the camera catches the mayhem below, the distant figures being rounded up, running away, some being shot, there is a little girl in a red coat walking against the current. The movie is black and white. The little girl in a red coat stands out. She is a person — it says. They are all persons down there in the hellish scene; each of them is someone's daughter, son, mother, father, friend, beloved; each a child of God; each a neighbor.

Schindler intercedes for and protects his workers, his investment, his list. At the beginning of the movie they are only that — an investment. Much later as he is attempting to transport his entire work force in Czechoslovakia, the train of box cars transporting women mistakenly ends up in Auschwitz and the efficient processing begins. Schindler intercedes again, eager to save his investment. The S.S. officer refuses to reverse the processing of prisoners on their way to the gas chambers because it is inconvenient. Instead, he offers several cattle cars of other prisoners who are about to arrive from Hungary. It doesn't matter. "You shouldn't get stuck on names," he advises Schindler. [See "Naming the Dead," John Ottenhoff, *The Christian Century*, 2/16/94, p. 172]

Thinking about the Holocaust makes us uncomfortable. The reason, I think, is that it happened because ordinary men and women, people who were patriotic, who loved their country and their families, men and women who played with their children and looked forward to peaceful retirement and grandchildren, people who went to concerts and museums and church on Sunday morning, forgot that other people, Jewish people in this instance, were human beings. And having forgotten that, it didn't much matter what happened to them. It happened because one group of people became convinced that race and religion of another group of people was not only inferior, but rendered those people sub-human, and so normal standards of morality and basic decency could be suspended and discarded.

In fact, in light of the realities of life in this world there may be no more important words for Christians to hear: to love God with heart, soul, mind and strength and neighbor as self is still subversive. It's not as if dehumanizing racism has disappeared. After all, Louis Farrakhan and his spokespersons, in spite of the admirable and strong characteristics of their organization, continue to talk about Jews in terms that are simply and profoundly racist. David Duke almost won an election a few years ago, using very similar language about African-Americans. A United States Senator uses the crudest and most dehumanizing racial stereotypes about black people, offers a mild apology and life goes on. Skinheads in Frankfort and Skokie deface synagogues, Brown Shirts salute and harass Jews in Russia. Love your neighbor is still relevant and subversive.

Hans Kung, distinguished theologian who teaches at Tubingen, Germany, has written a book, *Theology For The Third Millenium* in which he suggests that world peace will remain illusive until the religions of the world establish peace and learn how to live with respective, differing truth claims. Kung says, in a way that makes reactionary conservatives of every religion, including our own, shudder:

> Religion isn't absolute: nothing about religion is absolute: rituals, rules, even our theology. The only absolute is the absolute.

All religion, Professor Kung concludes, can be evaluated by and must hold itself accountable to a common affirmation of the dignity and sanctity of the individual human being. Religion is true, he says, to the extent that it affirms and embraces the human life of its own adherents and of all people.

The secret is that this is not simply a matter of good feelings, of trying to be nicer to strangers. It is, Jesus taught, a matter of deep and profound commitment: a conversion, if you will. The way Jesus described it, it is a turning of your life to God, an accepting of him as personal Lord and Savior. And when you do that, when you come to Jesus Christ, you also come to your neighbor.

What you do when you decide to try to be more religious is find a neighbor to love.

What you do when you want to enrich your spiritual life is not only pray more, but love a neighbor.

What you do when you decide to be faithful to God is love your neighbor.

And when you do, something happens: to your neighbor who is affirmed and included in whatever of God's grace lives in you, and something happens to you, I guarantee you — Jesus promised.

You approach the Kingdom. You step over a boundary and into the Kingdom of God.

You will live more because you are loving more.

You will become more fully you because your family has just increased in size.

Your heart and soul expand because you have neighbors to love.

In a fine new book, Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor, urges:

> Love God. Love a neighbor. Be a neighbor and let's not complicate things by arguing about the specifics. You know what it means to love because sometime or another you have been on the receiving end of it. If you want the world to look different next time you go outside, do some love. Do a little or a lot, but do some and do not forget to get some for yourself. [*The Preaching Life*, p. 120]

Micah Marty closed his letter to Fourth Church, after describing in fairly harrowing terms the violence affecting the people of the near east:

> So you can pray for me — but most of all pray for peace. Maybe someday we won't have to pray for peace anymore, but at times like this that day is impossible to imagine.

And so it is difficult to imagine. What is possible, of course, is to pray for peace, to pray for enemies, to include in your human family all of God's children. It is quite possible to put your love to work: to say no, for instance, to racism, racial stereotypes in your social life and your workplace: to love your neighbors, your dear ones, your near ones, someone who needs you.

And most important of all, in these deepening days of Lent, simply to stay close to him and to listen to him, our dear Lord, on his way to his own dying, still teaching — challenging — urging — pleading with you and me.

Come close to the Kingdom of God.

> Love God with all your heart, and all your soul, all your mind and all your strength and love your neighbor as yourself.

All praise to him. Amen.